Recontextualising Pandemics: A Critical Study of Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*, Ling Ma's *Severance* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* as Post-Apocalyptic Novels

A Synopsis

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Prepared Under the Supervision of:-
Dr. Poonam Nigam Sahay,
Associate Professor,
University Department of English,
Ranchi University, Ranchi.

Submitted by:-
Parvez Hasan,
Research Scholar,
University Department of English,
Ranchi University, Ranchi.

Ranchi University, Ranchi

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Introduction:

Before diving into any interpretations, it's important to first understand what Apocalyptic fiction is. This genre is a branch of speculative fiction that deals with disastrous events that cause the downfall of civilisation. It often centres on what happens after these events, focusing on how characters overcome challenges. Whether the destruction is triggered by natural disasters, pandemics, nuclear war, alien invasions, or zombie outbreaks, Apocalyptic fiction explores themes like survival, resilience, human behaviour, and the breakdown of society. According to Professor Barry Brummett, it is often the concept of change as much as the concept of destruction that causes public interest in these themes. Typically set in a post-pandemic world, these stories examine how characters cope with the challenges of finding food, habitat and safety while confronting threats from other survivors or dangerous environments. Pandemic fiction often serves as a lens through which authors explore questions of morality, ethics as well as the adaptability of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable hardship and the subsequent rebuilding of society.

Now, the proposed synopsis, "Recontextualising Pandemics: A Critical Study of Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*, Ling Ma's *Severance* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* as Post-Apocalyptic Novels", tries to analyse pandemic trauma, fear and flexibility as reflected in pandemic literature to relate them with the recent worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 and also historical events of pandemic that have ravaged the face of the Earth. To face the dire situation of a pandemic, it is essential to visualise the impact of a pandemic on personal along with societal levels. No other genre can help visualise such ramifications of a pandemic more than Pandemic Fiction.

State of the Art:

The present issue endeavours to explore the importance along with significance of humankind's psychological, emotional stamina and survival during as well as after a real-life pandemic through the characters present in the novels. Through meaningful, purposeful story-telling, these novels explore the mental impact of contemporary society's economic, social, political, religious and cultural dismantling on an individual to make them aware of the ways in which they can overcome the impact in post-pandemic times. These novels work as a tool for emotionally retaining a panic-stricken reader parallel with reality's examples of hope and despair. These novels almost act like patrons of emotional support in daunting situations.

Problems to be investigated regarding Pandemic fiction:

1. How does it present a sense of fear, trauma, anxiety, isolation and other detrimental psychological issues to the readers?
2. How shall it make its readers aware of the approaches required to face the atrocious nature of its mental impact?
3. How do these novels shed light on the inner struggles such as fear, trauma, anxiety and isolation of the characters present in the novels?
4. How does the event scrutinise the psychical impact of the social, political, religious and cultural breakdown of humankind on an individual as well as the collective before their eventual recovery?

Aims and Objectives of the Study:

1. The concerned study aims to unravel how the pandemic affects human life psychologically and physically, as reflected in the primary texts – Josh

Malerman's *Bird Box*, Ling Ma's *Severance* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*.

2. The study's objective is to bring out the mental issues that the characters of the novels were facing so that we can try to find solutions for them. Through finding the solutions, the study also aims to make the readers aware of the issues and help them take the necessary paths to overcome them in a real-life pandemic situation, with relatable issues.

Research Hypothesis:

This study seeks to hypothesize that pandemic novels often depict diseases that are based on real-life pandemics and they often seek to relate to such crises which affect individuals psychologically. The research work is an attempt to visualise the trauma, fear, anxiety, isolation, resilience as well as other emotional aspects confronted by the characters in the novels by Josh Malerman, Ling Ma and Emily St. John Mandel. It will seek the possible solutions for such issues to make the readers aware of the appropriate approaches to face them. In the wake of pandemics, a set of terms including "quarantine," "isolation," and "loneliness" has gained widespread use in public discourse. These terms, however, are not merely descriptive of physical states; they carry with them profound implications for mental as well as emotional well-being, often raising unsettling questions about existential fear along with the crises that accompany it. Individuals are grappling with a range of inner challenges, including anxiety, despair, hopelessness, and an overarching sense of meaninglessness. These emotional responses highlight the urgent need for strategies that enable individuals to confront as well as process these realities, fostering mental, physical, emotional, and social tenacity. They will also be highlighted and elaborated upon in my research endeavours.

Literary works, rich with depictions of human suffering along with resilience, offer a valuable lens through which these contemporary challenges can be examined. Throughout history, literature has served not only as a means of escapism but also as a powerful tool for confronting as well as understanding reality in a manner that is both therapeutic and rehabilitative in its nature. This study aims to engage with selected literary texts that resonate with the experiences of the pandemic, exploring how tragic literary heroes can be reinterpreted as role models who provide insights into coping with existential anxiety. By revisiting these works, the study seeks to uncover potential answers to the complex philosophical questions that the pandemic has brought to light, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the human condition in times of crisis.

Research Design and Methodology:

This research work is an example of qualitative research. The methodology applied to this proposed research work is a close textual analysis, based on a Mixed Method approach. The apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes of the select novels will be studied to understand how the characters make the reader aware of the inner turmoil of such real-life crises in addition to overcome their trauma, fear, anxiety, isolation besides other psychological predicaments. The study will be analytical, descriptive, interpretive and critical in nature. It will adopt the MLA 9th edition of citations and referencing.

Sources of Data and Tools to be Used in Collection of Data:

The proposed study is qualitative in nature. Hence the tools to be used are books, journals, scholarly articles, available scholarship in the area, excerpts from interviews and authentic sources from the internet. A close analysis of the novels will

be done to critically analyse them in conforming to the topic of the study. This will lead to several clues for further investigation that can advance this research.

Purpose and Significance of Study:

This study holds immense importance as it sheds light on the pandemic situations of the select novels, thus enabling readers to reflect on the real-life circumstances of pandemics. The study will focus on the critical analysis of the chosen novels to reflect the lived experience of the characters along with their psychological impact in the select novels. This study recognises the similarities and differences in inner issues fuelled by social, cultural as well as personal crises in the context of a real-life pandemic along with seeking to analyse their contingency in addition to appropriateness. It is observed that the characters in these novels display immense adaptability in the face of crises. Although they are overpowered by the sheer force of the pandemic in the beginning, they gradually develop the skills and grit required to overcome the hardships they encounter. Ultimately, the significance of the study lies in the addition to the personal as well as collective knowledge base of our society by suggesting ways in which civilians should react and behave in times of pandemics to subsequently emerge victorious over such wrath of nature.

The psychical impact of pandemics, like COVID-19, extends beyond the realm of biomedical intervention and delves into the domain of philosophical inquiry. Critical questions arise concerning the pervasive fear of contagion, particularly in social settings, the mental toll of prolonged self-isolation, the struggle to find moral as well as emotional support during and after recovery, in addition to the prevalence of self-interest along with immoral behaviour among some members of society. These issues underscore the psychological dimensions of the pandemic, which demand a deeper exploration.

Plan of the Work

The proposed thesis will be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1 : Introduction

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

Chapter 3 : Surviving the Shadows in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*

Chapter 4 : Unveiling Inner Strength in Ling Ma's *Severance*

Chapter 5 : Collective Harmony as Emotional Anchor in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

Chapter 6 : Conclusion

Bibliography

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Chapter 1: Introduction

History has witnessed the impact of past pandemics such as the Black Death, Cholera Pandemic, Swine Flu, AIDS Pandemic, SARS and so on. Whenever such diseases have arrived, they have spread themselves like wildfire to turn into an epidemic or pandemic, wrecking the civilisation. The most readily witnessed pandemic, COVID-19, has also deflated the human spirit. It has given birth to the term "new normal" which refers to the changes in societal behaviour, routines and norms resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The new normal reflects how individuals, communities along with institutions have adapted to the challenges as well as uncertainties posed by the pandemic. Additionally, it may continue to influence social and economic dynamics even though the pandemic has ended.

The representation of epidemic, pandemic in literature can be traced back to the 14th century AD with Giovanni Boccaccio, writing *The Decameron* in around 1353 while its English translation was published first in 1620. Other such works include *The Masque of the Red Death (1842)* by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Scarlet Plague (1912)* by Jack London, *The Plague (1948)* by Albert Camus, *The Andromeda Strain (1969)* by Michael Crichton and so on. The introduction of this thesis will briefly discuss how the authors in these works have related the psychological impact of epidemics and pandemics on individuals in contemporary society. A short glimpse will be thrown over the details of the diseases, alongside how the society spreads awareness to its common people in the texts.

For a brief introduction to the authors of the selected novels, let us start with Josh Malerman. He is an American author known for his work in the horror and thriller genres. Malerman's debut novel, *Bird Box (2014)*, being a bestseller, was adapted into a successful Netflix film starring Sandra Bullock. Known for his

atmospheric writing style along with the ability to create tension with suspense, Malerman has since published several other novels, including *Black Mad Wheel (2017)*, *Goblin (2017), Unbury Carol (2018)* as well as numerous short stories and novellas.

The next author of concern is Ling Ma, of Chinese-American origin known for her debut novel *Severance (2018)*, which blends elements of literary fiction, satire and dystopian fiction. *Severance* follows the story of a young woman named Candace Chen as she navigates New York City overwhelmed by a global pandemic named Shen Fever.

The final author of this study is Emily St. John Mandel, of Canadian origin. She is known for her novels that blend elements of literary fiction, science fiction and mystery. Her breakthrough novel, *Station Eleven (2014)*, follows a group of characters before as well as after a ravaging flu pandemic wipes out most of humanity. The novel explores themes of memory, art and survival in a post-apocalyptic world.

For more than two years starting in 2020, humanity has faced the hazardous situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. For a world which has survived such ramifications, analysing pandemic literature for equipping oneself with the awareness required to face such unforeseeable and dire situations becomes significant for the common man.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The word “Pandemic” comes from ancient Greek — pan (meaning "all") and demos (meaning "people"), essentially denoting the suffering of all humanity. In the canon of literature, the genre of pandemic fiction, especially pandemic novels, has a long antiquity. Although, arguably, the first recorded reference to any pandemic,

namely the Plague, can be found during the episodes of the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad*, the literary genre of pandemic fiction supposedly sprung around the 14th century AD, the era of the Black Death, when the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his book *The Decameron*. It is a framed narrative woven with social commentary, humour and a celebration of human psychological potency in the face of a bubonic plague.

A deadly instance of bubonic plague arrived in the city of London in 1665. Accounting for a merchant's experience of the plague, Daniel Defoe published his historical novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722. The book has been praised for its vivid descriptions of the plague and its effects on London. It is also a valuable historical document as it provides us with a firsthand account of the Great Plague as well as the ways in which people coped with it.

In 1842, Edgar Allan Poe brought out his chilling short story, *The Masque of the Red Death.* It is a haunting and thought-provoking story of the Red Death plague that continues to resonate with readers today. It explores timeless themes that remain relevant, prompting reflection on human nature, our relationship with death along with the limitations of wealth and power.

Another major work in this genre is *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London. Written in 1912, *The Scarlet Plague* is a post-apocalyptic novel set in 2073, six years after a distressing plague. It is considered a classic of post-apocalyptic fiction which has been praised for its realistic portrayal of the collapse of civilisation and the struggle for survival.

Perhaps the most well-known pandemic classic is *The Plague* by the French Nobel laureate, Albert Camus. The fictional city of Oran, Algeria is struck by a horrifying bubonic plague. The novel follows the efforts of Dr. Bernard Rieux

alongside a group of other characters as they fight to contain the outbreak to provide care for the sick as the city grapples with the tragedy. The emotional perseverance of the civilians is tested after the city undergoes complete lockdown and ultimately, they emerge triumphant. Dr. Rieux, the mouthpiece of Camus, narrates the ending of the novel by cautioning the readers of the resurgence of such plague at any given point in future.

Other major pandemic novels since the 1960s are *The Andromeda Strain (1969)* by Michael Crichton, *The Stand (1978)* by Stephen King and *Blindness (1995)* by José Saramago among others. Numerous journal articles that discuss various aspects of the select primary texts for this study can also be mentioned.

Among the various studies on the primary texts, Bethany Doane, in her introductory article in the journal Modern Language Studies, Vol. 49 No. 2, observes regarding Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*:

> Horror's speculation is thus not future-oriented, but rooted in the possibility that a different ontology is already present, if only ever adjacent to human empirical grasp. Like Malerman's *Bird Box*, horror not only relies on a human fear of the unknown, but also reveals the possibility of the unknowable, the forgotten, and the unperceived (Doane 13).

This paper discusses how horror explores the themes of speculative possibilities of facing challenging scenarios during a pandemic. My research endeavours will further discuss how the characters in *Bird Box* are affected psychologically by the horror and how some of them have been able to handle it on the way to emerge triumphant.

The journal article titled "Ling Ma's *Severance*: A Dystopian Pre/Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Time of Covid-19" by Soha A. Helmy highlights "…the similarities between the events in *Severance* and what happens during the COVID-19

pandemic. The analogy between both pandemics proves that dystopian apocalyptic works are not always science fictional" (Helmy 155).

This paper discusses the themes of totalitarianism, the dark side of global capitalism and the loss of individualism during a pandemic. My research endeavours will dive deeper into the mental and emotional repercussions of such overturned societal systems.

Regarding *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, Md Abu Shahid Abdullah and Tanvir Mustafiz Khan observe:

> *Station Eleven* shows the consequences of extravagant consumerism in a pandemic-ravaged, post-collapse world, it does not necessarily constrict itself as a mere cautionary tale of human greed and apathy. Rather, it shows numerous examples of the positive outcomes that humans can achieve even in dire conditions by choosing unity and compassion over egocentrism and conflict (Abdullah and Khan 159).

This paper explores how modern civilisation is transformed into a primitive one in the face of a pandemic when survivors lose miracles like modern healthcare, telecommunication, and other necessities and luxuries. My investigative pursuits will study its consequences on the psyche of the characters and how they manage to cope up with them.

Andrew Tate, in his critical work *Apocalyptic Fiction*, explores about *Station Eleven*:

> One of the reasons that the world dies so quickly in Station Eleven is because of its relentless mobility and the ordinary miracle of air travel: people travel across the globe in hours and the virus, horribly resistant to treatment, goes with them. These tropes of complacency followed by escalating panic and then

> years of struggle by a group of survivors are standard elements of apocalyptic fiction. Many of the characters are aware that the unhappy story in which they find themselves is uncannily familiar (Tate 133).

The critic here presents the idea of how a pandemic quickly grasps the world in its clutches and how the survivors mentally react to it, which is often not an ideal way of tackling the crisis. My study will try to find more helpful ways of facing such a crisis, inferring from the characters' behaviour in the select novels.

This literature review identifies the research gap. These critical works present the account of how a pandemic ravages humankind, both on a social and personal level but the research gap is that these could not take into account the prevalence of psychological issues during a pandemic, presented in the select novels, as well as how those are overcome by the characters. This study aims to take into account the pandemic's emotional repercussions and how the characters sustain their life by overcoming those issues.

Chapter 3: Surviving the Shadows in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*

This chapter will discuss Josh Malerman's objectives behind writing his novel *Bird Box* – of keeping oneself mentally resilient in difficult circumstances. In the apocalyptic world of Josh Malerman's *Bird Box,* the terror that destroys the world cannot be seen, or even imagined. It can only be known in its effects: nearly instantaneous madness and suicide in anyone who sees the thing, whatever it may be. On the one hand, it will shed light on how the characters in the novel survive the situation until they succumb to become the inevitable prey of the ominous. On the other, it will discuss how the central character, Malorie, through her inner spirit, tries to survive, keeping her children protected from the sinister creature that has caused the suicide contagion and ultimately succeeds. The novel's narrative perspective is

non-omniscient, the reader is never exposed to whatever haunts or destroys this world and thus can only ever engage with its monsters through a kind of speculation besides second-hand deduction. The characters are in a constant struggle for food, water along with emotional and psychological stability while being surrounded by fear of the pandemic. With the powerlessness of being unable to use their vision, Malorie with her two children is forced to take other sensory routes to carry out their daily lives besides expedition to Rick's haven. The issues of mental trauma, resilience in addition to Malorie's indomitable spirit of survival will also be related to real-life pandemic situations.

Chapter 4: Unveiling Inner Strength in Ling Ma's *Severance*

Chapter 4 will analyse the themes of Ling Ma's novel *Severance* and the situations of the pre-apocalyptic along with post-apocalyptic scenarios of the world to contrast the human priorities in both periods explored in the text. "Ma understands the pandemic as a break from the present. But she also sees the present as itself a disease of the past, an emanation of nostalgia and habit" ('Thinking Through the Pandemic: A Symposium' 358). In *Severance*, a facility for collective living touted by one survivor turns out to be just the suburban mall where he loitered as a teen, as he has failed to launch from nostalgia. Ma's Chinese-American protagonist Candace contrasts herself — an immune survivor — with victims of Shen Fever, the illness born in a free-trade zone that renders its victims capable only of repetitive rituals, such as setting a table. The victims of Shen Fever are indefinitely trapped in their memories of repetitive rituals in their daily lives. However, Ma reflects that there are not many differences between the fevered and the immune in terms of how the days pass for either of the parties – only the immune ones have a mindfulness of the natural urges of life, which the fevered have lost. Being healthy, the characters assemble as a team to travel across

their way to the facility and on their way they "stalk" homes to collect essential items for their survival. The chapter will discuss how Candace is getting psychologically affected by the pandemic while compensating it with carrying on her job. Being immune from Shen Fever, she does not feel the mental urge to flee the city like others who were trying to escape the grapples of the pandemic. It will also discuss how Candace overcomes her fear of isolation and breaks through Bob's autocratic regime to start a journey of personal liberation.

Chapter 5: Collective Harmony as Emotional Anchor in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

This study's penultimate chapter will analyse the themes of collective survival and harmony's triumph over any malignant assemblage of goons as shown in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. The study will investigate how the Travelling Symphony, the nomadic group of actors-cum-musicians, travels through the Great Lakes region of the United States and performs Shakespeare's plays alongside classical music, thereby keeping the flame of performative art alive besides keeping themselves away from emotional breakdowns. Mentally united, they protect each other from the spiteful group of the Prophet and his followers, resulting in their triumph over them. Finally, they reach the Museum of Civilisation in the Severn City Airport, where a bunch of survivors have spent twenty years since the Georgia Flu Pandemic hit the world. Their conglomeration keeps them rational until there is hope of the pandemic being subsided. In *Station Eleven,* "the Severn City Airport symbolizes a haven where people strive not merely to survive day-to-day but eventually achieve social harmony through progressive and proactive mindset" (Abdullah and Khan 159). The novel ends with a hope for civilisation starting to retake its roots when Kirsten, one of the protagonists, is shown electric lights coming

from a nearby town by the curator of the Museum of Civilisation. This marks the victory of humankind's persistence and sustainability over the deadly force of nature. This chapter will delve into the ways in which the survivors in *Station Eleven*, during the fearful, traumatic period of the pandemic, have shown great emotional and psychological resilience and how we as readers should approach such incidents in real life.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The last chapter summarises the research, reflecting upon the placement of the study within the existing contributions and concludes with a reflection from the researcher. This study emphasises how Josh Malerman, Ling Ma and Emily St. John Mandel have demonstrated the mental effects of different pandemics in these select novels besides how the major characters go through the agony, fear and trauma inflicted upon them. These novels also explore how the characters' interpersonal relationships change or develop within the course of the pandemic, helping them survive the apocalypse. These novels also explore the mental impact of the economic, political, religious and cultural breakdown of the depicted societies, paralleling them with real-life pandemic situations. One common but noteworthy aspect of all three narratives is that the survivors show impeccable psychological resilience while unitedly following the needful strategies to ultimately achieve victory over the pestilence. The conclusion will present how readers may become aware of the possible ways to help them navigate mental and emotional crises in such dire situations.

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Relevance and Contribution to Present-Day Scenario:

The research topic proposed here holds great relevance to the issue of pandemics as discussed. By examining literature from the past, we can gain valuable insights into an individual's inner perception, understanding along with response to previous pandemics. This knowledge can help an individual develop effective strategies for responding to future pandemic's mental and emotional impact besides helping life's sustainability. Even though the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced significantly, this study remains beneficial as it helps its readers be equipped with the skills to deal with similar crises in the future.

Scope of Research in Future:

The resilience of societies in the face of pandemics has often been tested, yet the psychological, social, and economic scars they leave behind stay persistent across generations. As such, this study offers myriad reasons to researchers to build upon fresh grounds through which they can explore how diverse cultural contexts shape individual responses to crises, providing revealing and sharper insights that can contribute to more holistic approaches to public health. Future scope of research in this area can also be broadened by integrating personal narratives with complex social frameworks. The researchers could further dissect the emotional and structural inequalities that pandemics would force upon society at such times. The researchers can also underscore and elaborate upon the importance of fostering global solidarity in combating pandemics, with tangible solutions as the interconnectedness of modern societies necessitates a well-coordinated, empathetic response to ensure equitable access to medical, emotional and psychologically balanced care as well as resources.

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